DENVER JOURNAL of EDUCATION & COMMUNITY

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Community Vision for Education of Children

A PROJECT OF THE COLLECTIVE

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A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR | ANTWAN JEFFERSON, PH.D

This is the Denver Journal of Education and Community (DJEC). Welcome to the first issue.

DJEC is a community-sourced education publication that reflects the viewpoints of a wide range of perspectives throughout the Denver-metro area. We hope that the Journal becomes a reliable and valuable addition to the area's education landscape, bringing to the fore the diverse voices of residents of the metro area's cities and counties. We rely on stories and experiences to understand and represent the texture and diverse views of public education as a public concern.

Despite our publication style, we do not rely on established traditions of journalism and reporting, nor do we employ existing modes of education research to produce this journal. Those are being done in the area already, by high-quality and reliable resources for education thinking throughout the area. What we hope to offer is an additional layer of thought and experience in public education in the metropolitan community. And for this, we rely on a form of community-sourced knowledge that is made when people are in dialogue with one another: neighbors, coworkers, strangers, friends.

Throughout this first issue, you will read the word "community" many times. And it means different things for each of the writers contributing to this issue. It also was used in many different ways in each of the conversations that took place. This type of variation underlies what this journal is about. We do not all have the same experiences, we do not all see the same things, and we do not all want the same things. Nonetheless, we depend upon the system of public education to give our children the experiences they need, and the knowledge they need, to become citizens engaged in our society, and to help move our society forward.

While our views of community, and our beliefs about public schooling may be wildly different, what we have in common is connection to the Denver metro area. In the view of DJEC, this shared connection is enough for us to explore our differences, find what we have in common, and avoid allowing our differences to be the basis for our separation. In many contexts, including public education, one approach to this difference is to find a common thread and to rely on this common thread for decision-making. Using well-established principles of democracy, this means following the majority view. This, however, can cause really unintended consequences, such as in overlooking or erasing what makes us, and our experiences, unique.
All of our views matter, and DJEC is committed to welcoming and sitting-with these differences in hopes that we can closely examine the education of our children and support innovation and improvement; ahem, community-sourced innovation and improvement.

For sure, we won't get it right. We are not trying to get anything right, except in representing the multiple and varied views of parents, students, elders, organizers, educators, concerned citizens, artists, and the range of people who make our city and region unique. In many ways, the focus on getting things right has kept us from seeing and valuing the true resource of different perspectives. This is what we aim to do at DJEC: open our minds and ears and eyes and hearts to more of us, and to learn from our neighbors, regardless of their status, profession, qualifications, or political leanings.

About the Issue

The theme of our first issue is Vision; not DJEC's vision for education in Denver. Remember, we are a community-sourced education journal.

In this first issue, you will find an opening long-form journal article that captures a set of complex and varying discussions that occurred in Denver and Aurora between May and August 2019. These conversations occurred in recreation centers, homes, and law offices, involving former and current students, family members, educators, and other members of the area's broad and various communities. Each conversation was different and produced different outcomes. The one feature that each conversation had in common was a central question, which informs the theme of this issue: What is the vision of the community for the education of children? That, and being audio recorded. This is how we cultivate the content for this and future issues of DJEC.

You also will find four responses to this long-form article. Each contributing writer (a high school student, an educator, an education scholar, and an individual community member) offers their own perspective on the ideas in the long-form article, offering a glimpse into some of the different ways that each of us may see the same phenomenon from our own angles. This, for sure, is what DJEC is about.

As you read this, we're working on sourcing our next issue; you are more than welcome to join us. At the end of this issue, we describe a few ways you can.

A Note About the Future

This first issue is written in English, offered in print form. We have set priorities to make the Journal as accessible as possible, including translating it into other languages and in offering it on a digital platform. This, too, is what DJEC is about.

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BEARING WITNESS WHILE BEARING BURDENS

By | *Allan Tellis*, Chief Writer, Denver

"I probably need therapy at this point after going through all of the stuff that I had to go through to get her through school.. What I realized is, it's not because she's not smart..."

Navigating the complexities of the contemporary educational system can oftentimes leave community members with more questions than answers. In conversation with their peers, parents routinely voice concerns about whether or not the current educational system is properly equipped to prepare their child for life outside of school. There was also a deep sense of consternation about the ability of their local educational system to be flexible enough to work for every student, especially their own children, while maintaining a sense of academic rigor that propels students towards higher intellectual abilities. This idea of how the educational system should function is complicated as ever-present societal factors such as race and class infuse their way into foundational institutions, like local schools.

For many, education can, at its best, function as a reprieve from these heavy social issues. For some family and community members, however, the educational system a battleground meant to break current social stigmas and give children the tools to break primitive social constructs. The educational system, for all community members, was seemingly supposed to be purposed for much more than creating an apparatus for students to learn the prevailing academic habits of the day. The educational system provides a way to create a community focal point--it functions as a system capable of producing places for people to learn, and perhaps most importantly, provides a way to help shape the future by catering to the needs of the youth. This process, according to community members, has been stifled by the inability to create a unified vision for how those aspirations should be facilitated.

What community members encounter instead of the educational system of their dreams, is a functionally broken system which leaves multiple parties pointing fingers at each other, trying to place blame for the apparent failures of a system that appears insurmountable; much bigger than any of its particular constituent parts. When discussing the educational system in their peer groups, community members often dwell in the abstract, thinking of the esoteric meaning of education. In the meantime, their real lives are deeply affected by the way the educational system effectively functions.

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Their lives become so intertwined with their relationship with the school system that they could very well "need therapy after" all is said and done.

Students and parents alike envision an educational system that doesn't leave everyone who comes into contact with it traumatized. At a young age students learn that educational institutions are industrial complexes more concerned with policing their behavior than helping them pursue scholarship. Parents, for their part, feel they are forced to send their kids off to schools where they know it will be difficult for their children's ingenuity to not be dulled to the point they simply become well-disciplined chair sitters.

This orientation towards policing over teaching is not subtle and it is not lost upon the children that attend urban schools. For instance, students at local school vocalized their hopes to one day attend schools that are not reminiscent of prisons. In short order they identified tangible aspects of their educational environment that elicited feelings of being incarcerated like the building's floor plan and the emphasis on controlling behavior and time. They also hope one day their younger siblings are able to attend schools without armed police patrolling the hallways. Dealing with the material reality and aesthetic of the school is not the only way the current educational system wears on the confidence of kids and sanity of parents, but it is a major factor.

What do community members see when they look at our current educational system?

"I think it's like a double-edged sword. As you're fighting to make the school better for your students, your student is being left behind"

Facing the pressures of being expected to conform to the expectations of what they believe to be a rigged and highly racialized educational system can leave students and parents feeling powerless and full of despair. For instance, one parent from the Whittier neighborhood, tearfully told the story of being called by her son's school, and informed that her son had attempted suicide. "I got the call. He tried to hang himself because of the bullying," she said. "There are other children feeling the same way, feeling either they're too dumb or they can't understand this. These children need to be recognized."

While she was the only parent who shared this story, there was a widely shared knowing about receiving dreaded calls such as these. The level of fear, and vulnerability this mother displayed was a sentiment shared by many parents who also worried about the fate of children that are different. Due to her son's atypical learning style, he felt clumsy in the educational system, unable fit in with his classmates. She further unpacked her son's disposition, noting that he felt like a "failure" because he was unable to meet the prescribed cognitive tasks for his peer group.

Not acknowledging the struggles of these students is not a salient solution for educational systems as they look to improve. In fact, high school students reflected at length about how a significant number of their peers had disappeared from their educational environment. Many of their classmates were dropping out and perhaps more importantly, these students were more concerned with the notion that no one seemed to bat an eye as students rejected formal schooling altogether. Community members were perplexed when trying to bridge the gap between the intentions people have for the educational system as far as supporting students, with the reality of many students feeling like "just a number," as one student phrased it. Not only were parents concerned about their children being properly supported; many parents, especially parents of color, expressed deeply rooted concerns about their children being belittled at school.

Parents take hard their children's experiences with having their identities harmed by their teachers: telling them "they would never become anything", or using coded language to shame students like labeling them "hooligans." However, combatting this inappropriate behavior has been tricky for some parents. As one mother noted, she experienced textbook gaslighting while confronting an educator about the way the teacher treated her daughter. Preparing for this discussion with her daughter's teacher was difficult, but it seemed to this mother to be right, to be necessary. Her daughter's teacher, as she recalls, avoided any responsibility for using derogatory, racial language when engaging with her daughter.

Eventually, during the confrontation, the teacher began to sob. In justifying her tears, the teacher asserted that engaging in this type of conversation was causing her an overwhelming amount of stress. Throughout the conversations, several parents echoed similar thoughts, noting that there seems to be an impermeable barricade keeping them from having a strong determinant presence in their children's schools. One father summed much of these sentiments with a call for action. He suggested that school systems must fundamentally turn over and embrace a bottom up approach. By doing so, he believes parents won't feel as though they are outsiders watching the effects of the policies implemented by disconnected administrators at their children's' schools.

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Rather, in this model, he hopes parents become the policy shapers, constructing the vision for the future of the school. Empowering and including parents may work to relieve some of the tension between them and school faculty as interactions between groups may then have lower stakes; in this way, the vision for the school would include parents' concerns for a welcoming and supportive environment that sees children for who they are.

How can educational institutions adapt to meet the changing needs of urban communities?

"I always get this image of the day every kid comes into kindergarten someone is holding that kid in the air and the whole community is around them."

Community members clearly stated their desire was to construct an educational system that allows children to learn dynamically, and facilitates their children developing the skills that will make them competitive/competent in the contemporary economy and social world. While the details of this aspiration were articulated in a wide array of pragmatic steps, it is clear that education cannot simply focus on students memorizing information in circumstances that don't resemble the dynamism of real life. For one particular third grader, a better education includes schooling that exposes him to "real life situations" and helps students "learn what is around them." This student wants to learn how to navigate the bus system for example, or learn how to navigate his neighborhood's streets easily. Topics like these are not are not available for this third grader at the moment, and students and parents alike found this gap to be a shortcoming in the city's educational practices.

Many parents vocalized their concern that the educational system has become so focused on standardized tests that a fixation on what is being learned has displaced what they believe to be an essential function of education, which is "teaching students how to learn." Not only is this focus on test results not representative of the way students will be assessed after their days of formal education, but the emphasis on content focused education using standardized metrics to understand students reduces administrators' ability to determine how students are developing in their academic performance according to parents. Beyond the lack of transference of testing metrics to the real world, there was a pervasive sense amongst the discussion groups that hyper-structured educational settings create faux social circumstances that do not equip students to learn how to operate in less structured social settings.

Community members envisioned creating an educational setting that reflects a more open and inclusive view of education. In their ideal education environment, through schooling students would acquire skills that cannot be standardized and published in a textbook. One father asserted that his experience studying abroad was foundational in shaping his educational experience and believes education should include an emphasis on exposing students to fundamentally different world views. Other parents noted that teachers are restricted in that they only teach from the worldview they are most familiar with. To remedy this parents suggested that diversifying the teaching force would give students a chance to create a dynamic similar to experiencing different world views. For instance, one father, who is an African immigrant, noted several observations his son made to him about his experience in the schools. "From a kid's perspective, he says, 'I don't see a lot of diversity from teachers so it would be nice if I could go to a class that I could be part of that teacher experience.'"

It was strongly suggested by parents that institutions beyond the traditional school must be incorporated when mapping out the future of education. In order for children to experience the robust opportunities that learning outside of school can provide, parents need to feel assured that these other institutions are held to palatable standards. Parents no longer consider traditional school settings the only places education takes place, and as a society we must do more to enhance the ability of other institutions where children learn to be able to educate properly. Although an overreliance on metrics produced from the standardization of education was rebuked during the discussions, there was a sense that adding standards to major hubs of youth learning like YMCA's and other similarly educationally-focused programs may enhance the ability for children to become educated citizens.

How do community aspirations for education square with our with our current racial landscape?

"We need in Colorado more black teachers, so our kids can identify with them. It's hard for a white male teacher to identify with my son; they don't understand him."

While education should serve to give all children access to similar opportunities, the social and political dynamics that reflect inequitable conditions in the world outside of schools inevitably shapes our educational institutions. Students do not exist in a vacuum and are undeniably aware of how socio-economic trends like white flight and gentrification shape their educational settings and, moreover, their communities.

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"You don't understand since you're here it's going to start a snowball effect; there's going to be more white people coming and that's when we're going to get pushed out to another community," said a student to his peers. His classmate responded to his frustration noting that her family had bounced around the city's neighborhoods moving continually east in order to obtain affordable housing. She noted that increases in accompanying changes to the cultural makeup of the city's neighborhoods stirred tension about the collateral costs of such rapid change. This sense of disconnect was only amplified by interactions with teachers who misread the consequences of these demographic shifts. Or rather as the student put it, "I feel like we need more teachers that, that like connect with you, [because] honestly I have them savior teachers back in Montbello."

Parents are all too aware of how race and class intersect to fundamentally shape how one child will experience their formal education versus another child with a different background. One white parent, in a display of vulnerability and self-awareness, noted his difficulty in making sense of the fact his child's formal education will likely be positive as he believes our educational systems are essentially rigged to affirm the capabilities of affluent white students. Race and class are such powerful and intersecting social markers that it was difficult for participants to envision an educational environment that mitigates their effects on how children are educated. Parents, especially the parents from more diverse neighborhoods, became extremely imaginative about what it would look like if educational settings were to experience radically different circumstances in which every student had access to the same resources. Similarly, parents longed for an educational environment where the biases that are so pervasive in society are not reinforced by educators.

The political dynamic education is entrenched in also hinders educational institutions from reflecting the vision of community members. Locally in Denver, parents have become concerned about the way Denver's school board has functioned over the years. This concern caused participants to accuse the school board of being corrupt, elaborating that board members use the opportunity as a political stepping stone as they climb towards higher offices.

Discerning the landscape

Denver's demographics have seen quite a bit of change over the last several years and these shifts have placed a spotlight on the city's racial dynamics. Students, parents and educators noted that there can be barriers created between educator and student when cultural competence is not displayed by those regularly interacting with students and parents power. This dynamic becomes even more apparent as teachers, many of whom are young and white, are ushered into a "spicy community" for which they don't have much previous personal experience. In fact, in many communities throughout Denver and Aurora white residents are not the majority and, in some cases, there is a majority of none. The students in far northeast Denver are concerned that this disconnect creates an environment where they feel disconnected from their teachers. These students stated that they feel, in large part, that their relationship with their instructors is based on their ability to communicate with these adults, and in their experience, a lack of cultural competence often leads to a lack of understanding.

Parents with students in the far northeast area also noted that it is pivotal that students are able to interact in institutions where people of color, namely black people, exist in every strata of the institutional hierarchy. These parents believe that students can be put at ease when they know that their relationship with educators is not tainted by racial dynamics rooted in white supremacy. Furthermore, it was asserted that educators can only use their particular worldview as a frame of reference to teach and interact. Due to this, community members feel that good educational systems actively pursue diversity amongst their instructors.

Some parents did caution such immediate and harsh criticism of instructors noting that the conditions they are working under do not make such competence easy to display or develop, especially when combined with the principle demands of teaching. One mother for instance pointed out, "it has been [her] experience that the teachers can't really teach because they have to wear several hats. This child has ADHD; this child doesn't have a father at home; this child doesn't have a mother at home." Other parents agreed that teachers are put in a difficult predicament if they already do not have a reference point for students' struggles and are asked to teach while simultaneously navigating a complex social and professional environment.

These cultural disconnects between community and educators can have consequences that reach beyond an uncomfortable conversation or two. Parents say they have experienced situations where these types of cultural disconnects can lead to inappropriate labels of students which can serve to further stigmatize already marginalized students. These labels, whether they be that a young lady is "sassy" or that a young man is "insubordinate", can come with long lasting consequences, especially for students of color.

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Parents, students and educators envisioned an educational system that doesn't fear the stakeholders of the local community being the driving force behind schools. Parents in the most urban densely populated parts of Denver noted that there appears to be a fear from educational leadership to foster an environment in which parents are truly empowered. The perceived fears of parents, in this case, was noted as a major cause of distrust between the community and their educational system. Community members noted that without the development of an organic relationship between educational systems, community members can begin to feel as though the educational system is simply "imposing on the community" as opposed to integrating itself the community. On that same accord, parents and students felt that having a robust relationship between parents and educators would lead to a more fulfilling experience for the neighborhood, the students, the educator, and the parents.

However, establishing this robust, symbiotic relationship between communities and schools comes with nuanced problems. In far northeast Denver, where the Hispanic population has been steadily growing over the years, students noted that cultural barriers can keep their parents from feeling comfortable interacting with educational institutions.

Closer to the heart of the city, in the Park Hill neighborhood, parents encouraged each other to be aggressive in taking control of the school, suggesting that parents should demand to see what they want to come to fruition in educational institutions and afterwards, that they should not feel bad about their tone.

Parents envisioned a future in which the often hidden structural apparatuses that make the educational system function are open and accessible to them. For instance, they compared the way the Cherry Creek School District handles financial practices and policies to the way the Aurora Public Schools district showcases financials as an example of how education in urban cores is taken out of the hands of parents. They praised the transparency of the former while accusing the latter of shrouding such information deep inside the district's bureaucracy in hopes that parents would not concern themselves with that level of involvement in the district.

Participants envisioned an educational system that was nimble and flexible enough to adapt to the needs of its most unique students. Currently, with packed classrooms, overtaxed teachers, and overwhelmed administrators, it can become impossible for students to get their specific needs met.

One parent didn't want to place the blame at the feet of the teachers but believes there were simply "too many students in the classroom for her daughter to be noticed."

Other parents lamented the added stress students can experience at an early age when they are funneled into one-size-fits-all programs that they may not be ready for. One mother noted that this was the case for her daughter who was struggling with life skills and academics as early as the first grade. The rapid pace at which the educational system tries to make sense of these unique students leaves little room for nuance or adaptability. This can, as parents suggested, lead to children being prematurely labeled, but not being diagnosed properly, and then consequently developing a sense of inferiority because they are not able to do the tasks they've been prescribed.

The current educational system is ill-equipped to handle the baggage accompanying students from outside of the institution. Many institutions don't foster an environment that privileges "social-emotional learning" over preparing students to take standardized tests, at least in the eyes of several parents and students. This orientation towards creating good test takers can make instructors appear unsympathetic to the needs of unique students. Parents from all areas of the city registered complaints that they had to fight to have their children's known needs implemented by their respective schools. Many students become shy, and feel unable to speak up for themselves when interacting with a teacher who seems uninterested in altering their curriculum to work in conjunction with the specific needs of a non-traditional student.

While innovation and change were traits favored by participants, they did not want such novelty to come at the expense of maintaining the historical legacy of the educational institutions in their communities. Especially in the neighborhoods of Montbello and Park Hill, educational institutions have served as more than just buildings purposed for academic study; they have also functioned as symbols of pride for the successful legacies of their respective communities. Students focused on the advantages of being connected to an institution that has tradition beyond their current student enrollment. Without this connection students suggested they often feel like a number being processed from the beginning of their academic careers until they graduate.

Furthermore, they felt cheated out of an experience that many of their older community members had before strategies like co-location, charter schools and innovation schools ruled the educational scene.

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Some argued these tactics led to the erasure of legacy and eventually drives a wedge between the educational institution and the community. Others however, noted that changes in the modern educational landscape have not made an organic relationship between community members and local schools possible. While walking through the difficulties of connecting educational institutions and community members one father noted that "probably nobody on your block goes to the same schools that your kids go to; everybody feels like, 'I'm going to do what's right for my kid and school choice plays a role in that.'" According to this parent and several others the disillusionment of a unified community goal makes it increasingly difficult to define what direction the community wants the local educational institutions to head in.

A Park Hill grandmother, who has been extremely active in both the neighborhood's schools and churches since 1963, is deeply concerned about the disconnect that is growing between that neighborhood and its educationally-focused institutions. Parents praised the work of educators who work to establish themselves in the community, as is the case for the current principal of one of the neighborhood's oldest schools, Stedman Elementary.

Widening education's narrow focus

"One of the things I've been imagining and working on creating is this idea that learning happens any and everywhere, so that school itself is not defined by a four-walled building that children have to go to every single day in the same way."

The idea of moving education beyond the solely academic extends into reimagining the way education prepares students for life outside of the formal school setting. Parents and students expressed that there has been a pervasive notion in our educational institutions that in order to achieve success in the future, students must excel early in their academic career to later attend college. However, parents and students alike believe being asked to choose between attending an elite university or living an unfulfilling life is a false choice. This perceived binary not only puts pressure on students to prematurely know what they want to accomplish in life; it also creates anxiety in students who are not thriving academically to resign themselves to the notion that their prospects for the future are limited.

Parents feel that it is important for their children to be aware that their education can take many different forms including learning a trade.

Some students go their entire formal academic careers without being presented any post high school options that do not include a four year degree. While parents did assert that college should be normalized and not presented as an option for only well-off and gifted students, there was a strong sense of concern that students are not being shown a full display of options.

On the student side of things, this reductive slate of choices undermines trust in the educational system, as they know they're not being told the whole truth. Several parents expressed concern that this setup allows "middle of the pack students to check out" early in their academic careers and thus fall through the cracks.

Envisioning a more perfect educational future was a difficult task for students, parents and educators. Most of the conversations involved addressing the negative--the current limitations of our educational systems--and then assuming that the opposite would in fact be positive. While this "other option" approach is not likely to produce the educational panacea many hope for, it is an interesting starting place.

Through the dialogues of individuals that represent several communities it did become clear that the current state of affairs is not adequate for everyone involved. It is fraught with complex social and political dynamics which can produce competing remedies. Currently, parents often feel disempowered, students feel lost and neglected and educators feel overwhelmed. However, participants maintained a sense of optimism, hoping things can, and should get better. Several parents shared stories of improvement, when things did in fact get better, treating those moments as exceptions to a more dominant narrative.

Allan Tellis is a journalist who is dedicated to uplifting voices in underrepresented communities in ways that give these voices their full depth. Allan has written for a variety of publications over the last seven years but has most prolifically written about marginalized communities in the city of Denver.

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FROM AN EDUCATOR PERSPECTIVE

By | *Wisdom Amouzou*

"It is difficult for indigenous people to conceive of life without a community as it is for most Westerners to imagine life in a community."

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The words of Sobonfu Some always remind me that the practice of community cannot be assumed as innate to all cultures and peoples. In some contexts, the embodiment and practice of community has been perverted, co-opted and rendered dysfunctional by a culture of rugged individualism. Ultimately, this country/state's long legacy of white supremacy coupled with its savage systems of economic exploitation has resulted in an education system that succeeds at growing citizens adept at maintaining the current hierarchies and orders of things. Our current approach to schooling our children is a reflection of bureaucracy's understanding of community. Even what we call "innovative" tends to align with this individualistic philosophy/world-view. My responses to the article will infuse an African ethos and spirit of community/intimacy into this dialogue.

I was born in Lome, Togo and immigrated to the United States with my family when I was 9. I grew up in Aurora, CO. I went to Aurora Hill Middle School, Gateway High School and graduated from the University of Colorado at Boulder. After graduation, I taught 7th grade Pre-Algebra and 8th Grade Socratic Seminar at STRIVE Prep-Montbello (before it transitioned to the old Montbello High School campus). To say I was misaligned to the pedagogical practices of that charter network would be an understatement. I found the pedagogy of intense behaviorism barbaric, unimaginative, and aligned to the next wave of colonialism. Not only did students feel like prisoners, but misaligned educators began to feel like prison guards. Like the STRIVE Prep RISE student, I too hoped to teach in schools not reminiscent of prisons. This is coming from an adult who experienced a school system in Togo where you could be beat for answering problems wrong on a homework assignment. I have a lived experience of what a colonial educational experience does to the soul. The contexts and communities might have been different but the violence was too similar. Worse than tears, I found that schooling system to double down on ineffective practices when faced with confrontation/feedback from students, teachers, or parents. Spaces like STRIVE Prep taught me that power only respects power. We could share feedback until our faces were blue but the opinions of a few in positions of power seemed to be the only levers for internal change.

"There is a difference between being in a position of power and being in a position of responsibility. Elders in traditional communities do not take power; they take responsibility and empower others."
-Sobonfu Some

Our current system is not being led by elders in this sense of the word/function. Folks in positions of power are rarely willing to be traitors to the systems which employ them. Sustaining radical change requires accomplices across lines of difference and power. Quite often, the type of parent/student/community power that is highlighted or supported is the kind of power that those in power can tolerate. At Empower Community High School, we ground our work in Daniel G. Solorzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal's framework of resistance which identifies that as Conformist Resistance. If folks in our community want to birth a new kind of education system, then we must be able to identify and develop what those scholars call Transformative Resistance. In short, we must take actions that embody a critique of our social conditions and fundamentally change the environment which maintains those conditions.

Two years after teaching at STRIVE and armed with the baggage of racial battle fatigue, I found myself teaching in Johannesburg at the African Leadership Academy (ALA). ALA was the first school I taught at that was legitimately attempting to redefine the purpose of education. It was a private school that attracted entrepreneurial students from almost every country on the continent. Once at ALA, students (ages 16-23) were exposed to a 2 year academic program with traditional academics preparing them for Cambridge International Exams, an Entrepreneurial Leadership program developing their capacities for entrepreneurship, and an African Studies program entering a pan-African perspective.

I left ALA committed to finding other educators who wanted to truly create a new education system grounded in community. A system where adults and students left feeling not dehumanized but centered, valued, loved, and nurtured.

Fast forward four years and I currently serve as Co-Founder & Executive Director of a school called Empower Community High School. To launch Empower, we engaged in an authentic co-creation process that took two years. Two years of breaking bread twice a month and co-creating this school. In this model of shared power, the paradigms of the old system make little sense. When parents and students are at the table, it's not really a battle to push for more diverse teachers and administrators.

It's a value inherent and obvious to the folks experiencing the educational equities. Of the 16 staff at Empower this year, 14 identify as Black, Latinx or Asian. If we failed in our goal to hire a diverse founding staff, it wouldn't have been just another missed metric.

It would have been a collective failure of the hiring team composed of students, parents and staff. The beauty and mess of co-creation is it takes longer but the outcome is more sustainable because the decisions are owned by a collective.

Empower's vision is "the world is ours". It was written by a student on our Community Design Team, Jay Carter, who was remixing Nas lyrics. Our mission is authentic education that is led by students, guided by educators, and co-created with community. In 4 years, students experience an Ethnic Studies program seeking to decolonize their perspectives on identity and power, 1-2 hours every day in an instructional block called FLOW where students are supported to develop their own projects that impact the community, and a school model grounded in shared power between students, parents, and educators.

This work is not rocket science and we ought to not treat it as such. It requires values, liberatory mindsets, philosophies and pedagogies, diverse talent, financial resources, and accountability systems aligned to what our communities value. If we approach this work in a spirit of community, we can birth the education system our children deserve.

"Community is the spirit, the guiding light of the tribe, whereby people come together in order to fulfill a specific purpose, to help others fulfill their purpose, and to take care of one another. **The goal of the community is to make sure that each member of the community is heard and is properly giving the gifts he has brought to this world. Without this giving, the community dies.** And without the community, the individual is left without a place where he can contribute. The community is that grounding place where people come and share their gifts and receive from others." -Sobonfu E. Somé, *The Spirit of Intimacy*

Wisdom Amouzou's life goal is infusing an African spirit and love ethic in all he does--whether it's singing in harmony with The Storytellers, writing tall tales or co-creating a community high school in Aurora. He currently serves as Cofounder & Executive Director of Empower Community High School.

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FROM A SCHOLAR PERSPECTIVE

By | *Amy Ferrell, PhD*

"I always get this image of the day every kid comes into kindergarten someone is holding that kid in the air and the whole community is around them."

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Education is the process of becoming ourselves. On this journey of becoming, individuals come into contact with the inner sacredness that affirms their supreme worth, doing so in community through the driving force of love (hooks, 2012; Vanier, 2008). The group fosters each person's agency with intentional negotiations of power, affording all the gifts of freedom necessary to move through liminal borders of opportunity for growth. ach story matters, and no story is finished. In community, everyone belongs, just as in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s idea of the beloved community, where power lies at the intersection of justice and love.

Yet, as the voices in the article attest, these key components of education—supreme worth, love, freedom, justice, and community—are severely lacking for many who enter into the schooling system. Instead of dynamic movement in and out of spaces that show the individual agency of each child, forced movement works as a mechanism for control over the bodies of children, fracturing sacred bonds of relationship and each child's discovery of themselves. Highways replace houses, and markets displace people. Schools, which once served as markers of cultural history by those who formerly shared proximity, now disintegrate into the pockets of reformers and developers.

For people of color and other marginalized social identities, access to equitable educational systems often means entry into an unwelcome and dangerous space (Baldwin, 1963). Contemporary stories of Denver families echo the century-old stories of sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), especially the story of John, whose Black community viewed his educational aspiration as a border of opportunity, while the local white community discouraged it, saying, "It'll spoil him – ruin him" (p. 230). Borders of inadequacy that restrict the educational process of becoming oneself ultimately result in the pain of rejection that accompanies separation. Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) describes the struggle toward wholeness when social life is persistently organized into hierarchical divisions of identities.

In these corroborating stories across space and time, power is less negotiated and more imposed, continuing the legacy of theft: stolen land, stories, language, education, and lives.

Community is the antithesis to oppression. Through mutual and unconditional giving, walls that serve only to deny the truth of one's supreme value deteriorate in community. Individuals not only contribute to the collective, but they also become themselves through the education of their own belovedness.

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2010) suggests that community often garners space for social affinity among members of marginalized groups, creating a sense of togetherness from shared experiences. Though not monolithic in beliefs, people in community together can resist a common threat to their lives, as a personal and political tool for protection.

Of course, any kind of sustained human togetherness yields tension. According to community scholar Parker Palmer (n.d.), conflict is in fact necessary to the creation of community. Without it, we repress the capacity toward understanding our own unique contributions. However, dissonance must not emerge as a mechanism toward singular self-importance, but out of relations of care and the continuous effort of commitment toward reciprocity among members. Educational scholars Nel Noddings (1996) and Angela Valenzuela (1999) suggest that through caring relationships, community counters the pervasive schooling practices that subtract, or steal, from students' full identities. As forms of community, schools hold the potential to operate as democratic spaces in which learning is not imposed, but negotiated and co-created, reflecting the values and lived realities outside of the school walls (Dewey, 1938). Democratic processes of debate, even argument, allow for the group's values to emerge and crystalize, as long as truth engulfs any niceties of social convention that protect the oppressor.

In the quickly changing landscape of the city and its schools, a great need exists for intentional connections across various kinds of community: schools, neighborhoods, and affinity groups. Where two or three are gathered in relationship, the seeds of community plant potential for conjoining the disparate and seemingly contradictory identities within the self and within a group, moving toward wholeness and healing (Anzaldúa, 2015). As reflected in the article, hopes of societies lie at the doorstep of schooling institutions, where the process of becoming might coalesce with that of belonging.

Whether in or out of schools, education only occurs in community, where a multitude of stories are told and where inferiority, inadequacy, and rejection are overcome by agency, sufficiency, and belovedness (Nouwen, 1992).

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Amy Ferrell, PhD, is an assistant professor of special education in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Colorado Denver, where she studies community, discourse, and literacy.

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FROM A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

By | *Alana Marie Barros*

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The current education system is set up in a way where students are in high stress situations all through school. Many students feel as though the school board and their teachers care more about numbers than the students they are supposed to be teaching. When I take a look around my high school I see countless kids who are unhappy and struggling. The pressure to do well in school started at a young age and has been pulling kids apart, and draining them of their individuality. Most kids want to be at the top of their class and have the highest grades but not everyone can be number one. It is believed that to get into a good college you must take all the hardest honors and advanced placement (AP) classes. Most of those classes do not relate to real life in any way and are of little interest to students. Also, students stress about standardized tests and pointless numbers that do not measure their intelligence but rather how well they can take a test. The school system's hyper focus on these numbers can cause a lot of stress, anxiety and can lead to depression.

The pressure to do well in school starts as early as elementary school because many families raise their kids to believe the only way to be successful in life is if they get a college degree from a prestigious institution. I believe that high school should be formatted more similarly to college in the sense that each class is weighted equally instead of weighted GPAs for honors and AP classes, and students can begin to take classes about skilled trades that actually interest them. If schools catered more to each individual student, parents would feel more confident in not only the social-emotional aspects of school but also the quality of education. The current education system is very "one size fits all" and does not work because every student is unique. Additionally, I have noticed that many kids are diagnosed with a learning disability and prescribed simple solutions like extra time for tests etc. while that might be good for a kid with OCD, it may just make the process harder for a kid with extreme ADHD or who has test anxiety and more time just allows them to stress for longer.

Home life also is not taken into account when a student begins to fall behind in school. A child's home life can have a huge impact on their performance in school. A child who is worried about where their next meal will come from or has unstable housing because of the dramatic increase in the cost of housing or living, changing family dynamics due to financial strain or whose parents are going through a divorce will have issues focusing in class and often try to lash out without really knowing why. These students are then stuck in a cycle because they are labeled as a "trouble maker" or a "bad kid".

Often times in low-income areas teachers are seen as "temporary" due to constant staff turn-over related to funding deficits, negative school culture, and poor student behavior. High staff turnover can further agitate a student who is already lacking stability and reinforce beliefs around worthiness, trust in others, and the ability to build lasting relationships with those in a position to demonstrate positive adult traits.

I wish that there would be more educational reform and individual focus on the student. My younger cousin who is a freshman and is only months into his high school career has already begun to struggle in school because his home life is unorganized and stressful. There are many aspects of his personal life that are challenging for a kid his age to understand and deal with. I think that his teachers cannot connect with him or understand his struggle because they have too many students and it then becomes easy for them to label him a "trouble maker". I want to be able to help him and look for ways to support him through school; but, it is hard when I am only a student myself.

However, if there was more focus on the individual student and their specific learning needs, including their social emotional needs that allowed students to feel safe and supported paired with more diverse teachers who have more global experiences, he and other kids like him would have a better education experience. I know my cousin and countless others just like him are extremely smart and talented, and with the right support or mentorship they could be extremely successful in whatever career or trade they choose.

I really like the idea of mentorship as a solution. I wonder if there is a way to connect students who are struggling with teachers or administrators in the school who resemble them and can relate to their perceived struggle, or through partnerships like a Big Brother and Big Sisters organization on steroids. Someone who has the time and dedication to build a relationship, who can advise, be a supportive ear and to help brainstorm solutions that are culturally sensitive and responsive to the students needs.

As a student athlete I have found support inside and outside the classroom through coaches that are invested in me and my future. I know that if I need to talk or am having a problem during the school day I can stop into the counseling center to talk to my coach or one of the assistant coaches who are also teachers in the building and that they will take the time to hear me and also excuse my absence or tardy to my next class if it takes longer than the five minutes of a passing period.

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The relationships I have with some of these people have a huge influence on how I do in school and life. They are also very important to me and do not resemble any other relationship in my life. This type of support should be available across the school community and not just the smartest or most talented kids.

There is not going to be one right way to educate the students of tomorrow. What schools need is to become flexible and focus on being adaptable to the ever changing needs of the student in the changing world that they are growing up in. College is not the only answer to a bright future and students need to be exposed to alternative options without bias.

This look at education is written by high school junior, student, leader, and athlete, ***Alana Marie Barros***.

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FROM A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

By | *Andrew Lefkowits*

The promise of public education - to create the engaged, informed citizens of tomorrow, to level the playing field and give an opportunity to anyone willing to take it - has been broken, and the stories told in this journal confirm it. However, that promise isn't broken in the same way for all people.

While our educational system could better prepare all of our children for the future, we can't ignore the fact hat the stakes are different for white kids - for my kids. My children have a cushion of privilege that protects them from the worst of our educational system. They are expected to succeed. They are held to high standards. Their behavior is viewed in the context of their age, not as dangerous or even criminal. They see themselves reflected in their teachers, their administrators, the books they read, the history they are taught. The system is designed to cater to my needs, my desires, my goals, it is responsive to me.

I believe that the only way we move toward educating ALL children, and doing it well, will require channels of power that flow from the bottom up.

Meaningful avenues for ALL parents, who know their students best and want the best for them, to hold the schools accountable for living up to the promise of public education.

In hearing the stories in this journal, a couple of things become clear. First of all, parents and community members have incredible insight into what is and, more importantly, what isn't working in the schools. Second, there is a sense of hopelessness, of futility in trying to change the system to make it more responsive. The system is based on expertise hierarchies that seem to create barriers to parents feeling empowered to force change. The teachers, school leaders and district staff are the ones with all of the "expertise", leaving parents feeling ill-equipped to suggest changes. When the power structures feel immovable and unresponsive, and we can see the ways a particular school is failing to serve our kids, the only reasonable option is to leave and hope to find something better at another school. In fact, the system is designed to encourage this behavior.

We have created a market based system that hopes that the ability of families to vote with their feet and take their student based budget dollars with them will force schools to be

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responsive to the needs of the community. And yet, in a system in which the mechanisms of school choice disproportionately favor white people and wealthy people, we get a system that is responsive to those people, at the expense of the rest of our students and families. We see this in big, structural ways, like immovable school boundaries, untouchable for fear of angering white and/or wealthy people, or magnet programs, once a tool for desegregation, but now often used to prevent "white flight" by concentrating privilege in a handful of schools. But we also see it in thousands of smaller, everyday decisions, made by teachers, school leaders, and district staff, from who gets called on to answer a question in class to who we make exceptions for when it comes to our policies.

The end result is a system largely designed for the minority of our students. In a district that is made up of 75% students of color and 65% students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch, we spend considerable time and energy catering to white and/or privileged families. And while those families find ways to make the system work for us, many families find themselves trapped in schools that aren't serving them well.

We have to rethink the mechanisms by which we hold schools accountable for serving all students well. If the only options are trapping kids in "failing" schools, or forcing kids out of schools for the promise of something better, we are failing - we are failing the children who can't move, we are failing the neighborhoods those schools serve, and we are failing the promise of public education. Schools need to be held accountable, but trying to do that entirely through bureaucracy is inefficient and puts massive power in our institutions. Meanwhile, entirely local based criteria for accountability leaves open the door to lower standards, and continued inequalities between schools. We need to find a middle ground.

We need new mechanisms that, rather than encouraging parents to change schools for something better, encourage schools to change into something better. But to do that requires new power structures that not only elevate the voice of parents, but are intentionally designed to elevate the voice of ALL parents. These are hard spaces to create because we have few examples of truly equitable power sharing in our society, and yet, if our kids are to thrive in the world they are poised to inherit, they will have to become fluent in creating those types of spaces. A world in which work is increasingly done collaboratively with an increasingly diverse group of people will require a skill set that we should be modeling for our kids. The ways we go about trying to fix our schools, should look like the ways we expect our kids to thrive in the future.

It seems to me that we will only do that by acknowledging who our systems were created by and for, and then working to re-think the way those systems work. We must engage in this work collaboratively, through honest, thoughtful conversation, a recognition of existing privilege, and a commitment to elevating ALL voices.

Andrew Lefkowits is a proud graduate of DPS. He has two kids at Stedman Elementary and is co-chair of Park Hill Neighbors for Equity in Education (http://phnee.org). He is also the co-host of The Integrated Schools Podcast (http://integratedschools.org/podcasts)

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OUR CHILDREN NEED CHAMPIONS.
WE NEED YOUR VOICE.
JOIN US FOR CHANGE.

BACKGROUND

The Denver Journal of Education and Community is a community education journal focused on topics of education in the greater Denver area. By engaging in community discourse, and connecting this content to scholarship and policy, DJEC hopes to contribute to local education thinking by offering a balanced and well-informed perspective.

THE CHALLENGE

- Important voices of students, family members, and community members are persistently absent or under-represented.
- Opportunities abound for high quality, community-based education thinking and leadership.
- There is high value in building and sustaining a model of community members creating content reflecting their perspectives and experiences.

THE PURPOSE

Content for DJEC is sourced from residents throughout the metro Denver area, including those who are directly and indirectly involved in the school-based education of children. By sharing their experiences, exploring solutions to persistent and emergent challenges, and thinking (dreaming) together about public education, our public sense of community grows while public education improves. To achieve this, residents are invited to host conversations with their neighbors, familiar and unfamiliar, and share these conversations to cultivate journal content.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN:

- To host a conversation, visit **EducationAndCommunity.com/host**
- To participate in a conversation in your community, visit **EducationAndCommunity.com/events**
- To support the journal, or to subscribe to its digital content, you can visit **EducationAndCommunity.com**

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